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Commodification of Cemeteries: Burial Grounds as Multi-Disciplinary Spaces

By Siobhán Doyle

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This paper investigates how many cemeteries have overturned their original function and negative association as sites of death and mourning to be transformed into multi-disciplinary spaces which provide visitors with a meaningful experience. There is an assumption about the purpose of the cemetery as a space of solitude and contemplation.¹ As Micki McElya affirms, there is always a symbolic weight implied to sites of dark tourism.² There is a universal human instinct to treat the dead with respect; human societies have developed ceremonies and rituals to mark the passing of an individual and to memorialize them.³

Commodification

First of all, I would like to put the loaded term of 'commodification' into context for this particular paper.

There seems to be a general confusion concerning the definition of commodification. Many associate the term commodity falsely with the process of mass production and, hence, an inevitable loss of authenticity. Another misunderstanding occurs when considering commodification from the perspective of the producer instead of from the perspective of the consumer as well. There are inherent problems in assigning an economic value to things (such as cemeteries) that were traditionally not viewed in those terms. Since promoting culture (and in this case the culture of death) is a rather complex issue, the commercialization of cultural goods is an adjustment, which fits consumption needs and thus gives the commodity its clear purpose.

Repatriation of Remains

The act of attracting people (dead and alive) to particular cemetery spaces is not a new feature in the transformation of burial sites. Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris was first used as a cemetery in 1804, but after three years, there had been only 106 burials. At the time, the cemetery was an inconveniently long distance from the center of town, and Parisians did not want to walk so far during funeral processions. Napoleon undertook a large publicity campaign on the cemetery's behalf, part of which involved moving the remains of numerous famous people to Père-Lachaise among them Molière (French playwright and actor) and the famed tragic lovers, Heloise and Abelard. Honoré de Balzac also wrote a number of serial novels that were published weekly in Paris gazettes. In the stories, important characters who died were buried at Père-Lachaise. So compelling

¹ Kate Woodthorpe 'Researching Death: Methodological Reflections on the Management of Critical Distance' in *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Volume 14, No.2, March 2011, 105.

² Micki McElya 'Remembering 9/11's Pentagon Victims and Reframing History in Arlington National Cemetery' in *Radical History Review*, Issue 111 (Fall 2011), 56.

³ Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, Piotr Bienkowski and Malcolm J. Chapman, 'Should We Display the Dead?' in *Museum and Society*, Nov 2009, Volume 7, Issue 3, 142.

were the descriptions of both the characters and the cemetery that tourists began flocking to see the real place where fictional characters were supposedly buried. This unusual attention grabber worked, and Père-Lachaise became the place to go when you were done going places. Similarly, Zentralfriedhof in Vienna is the second largest cemetery in Europe and is the resting place of many famous classical composers and musicians such as Ludwig Van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms and Johann Strauss. However, many of their remains were moved from other cemeteries to Zentralfriedhof in order to complete the collection.

Cemeteries as visitor attractions

This field of dark tourism is not new in the sense that people have been fascinated by the death of others, as it can be traced back to Roman gladiatorial games, medieval executions and Victorian morgue tours.⁴ Changes have occurred in the dark tourism sector as the sites have become increasingly mediated and it has become a focus for mainstream tourism in contemporary society. I will focus on cemetery sites such as Hollywood Forever (Los Angeles) and Glasnevin (Ireland) which have museums, gift shops and other facilities within burial grounds, have become hugely popular with travellers in recent years. Burial sites are often used as spaces for various activities- cultural, social, formal and informal. Therefore these sites can affect various groups of people- people who use and visit the space for a new experience but also mourners and those who use the space for its original purpose (i.e. cemetery or a site of pilgrimage).

As Thomas Blom states, a motive for visiting these sites of dark tourism is because tourists tend to seek and sometimes feel that they wish to experience the authentic and untouched.⁵ Cemeteries are spaces where the dead lay untouched, secure and in a space that is designed specifically so they can be remembered by the public but simultaneously rest in peace. Blom makes reference to the graves of famous people, including the pyramids in Egypt and the Taj Mahal, as examples of artefacts which were constructed for a particular purpose but which have become tourist attractions of considerable importance.⁶

Mediation in place

Moving on to different types of mediation in place within burial grounds. Not surprisingly, access to most burial spaces is mediated by opening hours. *Figure 1* shows some examples of admission fees into popular burial sites.

Figure 1: Prices of Official Guided Tour of Burial Spaces

▪ Graceland (Memphis)	€32-€68
▪ Stonehenge (Wiltshire)	€20
▪ Highgate (London)	€16
▪ Hollywood Forever (LA)	€13
▪ Glasnevin (Dublin)	€12

(Correct as of September 2015)

⁴ YouTube: 'BBC Fast Track' broadcast on 26th May 2012, uploaded by BBC Travel Show on 28th May 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhnLXMdMpyM>, accessed 18/3/2014.

⁵ Blom, 'Morbidity Tourism', 32.

⁶ Blom, 'Morbidity Tourism', 30.

Glasnevin and Highgate Cemetery have restricted access to certain parts of their cemeteries and allow access by guided tour only. Daniel O'Connell's crypt in Glasnevin where visitors can enter the crypt and touch this political leader's coffin for good luck and the West Cemetery in Highgate which is home to the most impressive architectural features of the cemetery. These are both subject to an admission fee. The Taj Mahal in India- which was commissioned in 1632 by the emperor Shah Jahan to house the tomb of his wife- has different breakdown in prices and also opening hours. Admission prices vary according to nationality of the visitor. Pere Lachaise has no admission fee and there is no restricted access within the grounds. However, visitors do not have the assistance of a tour guide or other staff member during their visit. Graceland, Memphis: Graceland has a live video stream in the grounds 24/7 which gives fans the opportunity to experience Elvis online through live events such as the annual Candlelight Vigil, Lighting Ceremony, Birthday Proclamation Ceremony and other exciting events taking place right here at the home of Elvis. Graceland events are broadcast digitally through Livestream and allows fans to tune in from anywhere in the world to be a part of Elvis events at Graceland. There are other forms of mediation within these sites such as a suggested dress code for visitors and restricted use of photography and video. In 2001, Highgate banned plastic flowers being placed on graves because they had received a number of complaints from people who see Highgate as 'not just a burial ground, but a site of metropolitan importance'.⁷

Glasnevin Cemetery Museum, Dublin

Glasnevin Cemetery & Museum was the focus of my undergraduate research in Visual & Critical Studies. The cemetery has been around since the 1800s but the site has seen many changes. During the 1990s, the price of maintaining the cemetery had overtaken any revenue that was coming in from burials and cremations so new strands of revenue were developed which included daily guided tours, flower shop and eventually a museum on site.

Of course there are many burial spaces that are popular tourist sites but Glasnevin is a working cemetery with an average of 100 funeral services taking place each week. The travel of visitors to Glasnevin Cemetery where internments are taking place at the same time that tourists are engaging with the space, ensures that visitors consider their motives more carefully than when visiting other tourist sites and other tourist attractions. In 2014, the Dublin City Sightseeing Tour Bus incorporated Glasnevin in its tour route which means that travellers on the open top tour bus enters the cemetery grounds through the front gates, passing by the crematorium and encountering funeral corteges, reiterating that this is a space of death that is used by the public on a daily basis.

Recreational Activities

Activities and events within cemetery grounds is not limited to tourism related events. Some cemetery grounds demonstrate how the solemnity of funeral practices does not exclude the possibility for whimsical or social uses.

⁷ David Graves, The Telegraph: No Plastic Flowers at Highgate Cemetery, modified 26/5/2001, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1331678/No-plastic-flowers-at-Highgate-cemetery.html>, accessed 14/3/2014.

Arnosvale Cemetery (Bristol, UK) offers Lightsaber combat classes which focus on specific techniques using partner work to build up fluidity and accuracy with lightsabers. There are plans for tournaments in the near future with International competitions to follow.

Hollywood Forever Cemetery (LA) projects film on the external wall of Cathedral Mausoleum, concerts and also hosts stand up comedy gigs, yoga classes and live theatre regularly. In addition to showcasing the best of cinema, Cinespia cemetery screenings feature pre-show DJs, themed photo booths and picnic. Visitors can be rest assured that there will be “a fully stocked bar and hot food available”. Films being screened there this month include Psycho, Ferris Bueller’s Day Off and Fight Club.



Figure 2: Outdoor screening of Breaking Bad at Hollywood Forever Cemetery, Los Angeles. April 2013.

Cultural/entertainment events have normalized the use of Hollywood Forever as leisure space, and those who choose it as a final resting place now do so with the understanding that the sanctity of the cemetery is often coloured by other rituals and practices.

Conclusion

A memorial, whether it is a simple monument or a museum, contains within it not only the superficial gesture towards remembrance and the dead but a wealth of information about the priorities, politics and sensibilities of those who built it. A memorial will tell us more about its builders than about those to whom it is dedicated.⁸

⁸ Andrew Whitmarsh, “‘We Will Remember Them’: Memory and Commemoration in War Museums”, *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* (Issue 7, 2001), 2.

When thousands of people visit the cemetery for leisure and entertainment, how that space is understood in public discourse is transformed. The increased popularity of sites of heritage tourism and dark tourism, along with changing attitudes toward death and dying indicate that events like those at Hollywood Forever are likely to become more commonplace. The cemetery is a visible symbol of the agreement among individuals that they will not let each other die. The sites I have mentioned espouse the idea of celebrating life rather than mourning death and encourages this shift in cultural perspectives by inviting the use of the cemetery as leisure space. Cultural and entertainment events have normalized the use of Hollywood Forever as leisure space, and those who choose it as a final resting place now do so with the understanding that the sanctity of the cemetery is often coloured by other rituals and practices. The increased popularity of sites of heritage tourism and dark tourism, along with changing attitudes toward death and dying indicate that events like those at Hollywood Forever are likely to become more commonplace.